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DEQ to address water quality at the Tensas River watershed

BATON ROUGE – The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality's Nonpoint source Pollution Control and Aquifer Evaluation and Protection Section is embarking on a cooperative agreement with the LSU Agricultural Center in an effort to improve water quality in the Tensas River watershed.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency awarded $130,402 in grant funding through the Clean Water Act to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality to improve water quality in the Tensas River, which runs through northeast Louisiana. The goal of the project is to reduce nonpoint source pollutants by installing grassed filter strips that will filter sediment and deter erosion. The vegetated filter strip-retention pond system is a best management practice that will act as a key control measure in the effort to restore the watershed to conditions that support its designated uses.

"Problems with the watershed have been primarily attributed to sediment oxygen demand, pesticide use, nutrients and turbidity issues," said Alex Appeaning, DEQ Deputy Secretary. "Through a comprehensive effort between DEQ and the LSU Ag Center, we hope to effectively reduce these impediments through nonpoint load reduction and by working with our partners to inform the public on best management practices that prevent or reduce runoff of soil and associated pollutants."

The suspected source of impairment is runoff from more than 440,000 acres of agricultural land which lies within the watershed. As a result of the impairment caused by agricultural pesticides, a caution on fish consumption has been in effect for the Tensas River since 1992. In 2005, DEQ developed a watershed implementation plan to identify and address potential sources and the causes of nonpoint source pollutant loads into the watershed. This plan details and encourages the implementation of best management practices to reduce pollutants from runoff within the watershed.

Located in the Ouachita River Basin in northeast Louisiana, the Tensas River watershed covers approximately 1,006 square miles. It originates as a small bayou at Lake Providence, and meanders for approximately 170 miles through northeast Louisiana, flowing south through extensive agricultural fields and emptying into the Black River near Jonesville. The watershed is dominated by rich and diverse alluvial soils which is typical of the Upper Mississippi River Alluvial Plain eco-region. Most of the land within the watershed is agricultural in nature, producing cotton, soybean and corn. Wetland forest accounts for about 19 percent of the land.

The project will center on the planting of Bermuda grass within an 8-acre vegetated filter strip that includes an adjacent retention pond consisting of native aquatic plants. Water control structures will be established at the outlet of the pond to regulate the discharge of water. The design is intended to channel the agricultural runoff water from more than 570 acres of surrounding agricultural fields over the vegetated strip. The water will run over the width of the strip, where the filtration process occurs, and will eventually channel into the retention pond for further pollutant retention and immobilization. The treated water from the pond will be discharged to a bayou that drains into Tensas River. Loading rates and retention times will be calculated, samples will be collected to monitor water quality, and DEQ will review quarterly and annual reports concerning the project and report to EPA.

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